

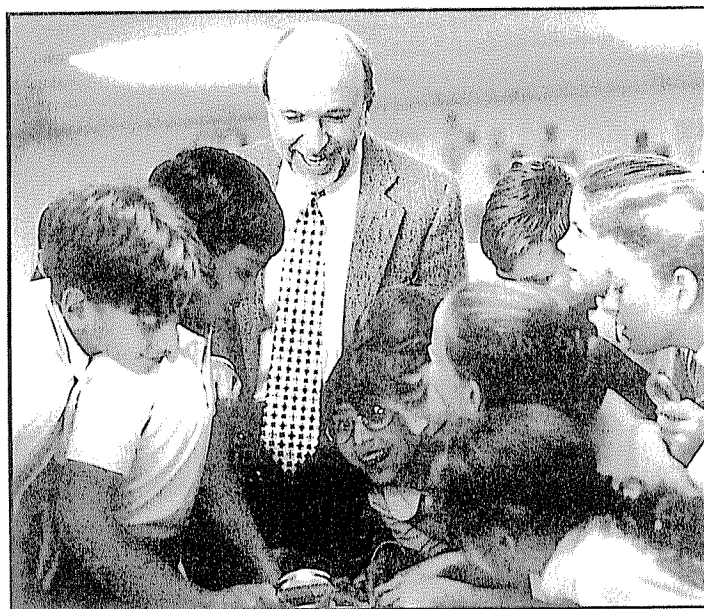
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# HEADLINES

*An occasional thought-piece from the Headmaster's Office  
at Berkeley Preparatory School*



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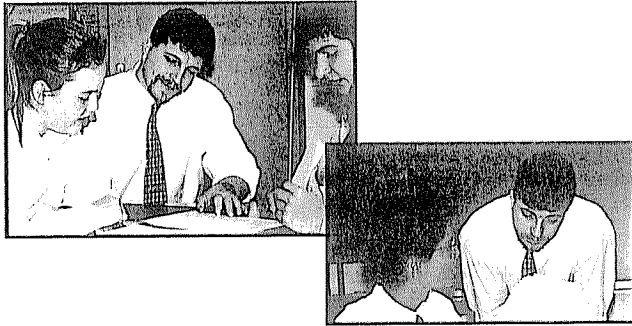
## GOOD TEACHING

*The Art and Science of Instruction*

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# A POINT OF BALANCE

Mark Hayes - Upper Division English Teacher



*"For extra credit," I said to my class, "you are to write me a two-page essay on the topic, 'What is a good teacher?'"*

*Two weeks later, the papers arrived. Almost a third of my students had chosen to write the essay. Now I could discover the opinions of the people who understand what truly works in the classroom: the students.*

*With this leap into the unknown, I hoped to find some common ground between my students and me about where and when effective teaching takes place.*

*Too often, the needs of the teacher conflict with the needs of the student. When these needs—whatever they may be—cannot be met, teachers burn out, students stop learning or eventually become alienated. In finding a point of balance between the competing needs of a teacher and a group of students, I believed I'd find a few clues about what could work for everyone in the classroom. If what goes on in the classroom doesn't work for the student, no matter how comfortable the teacher may be, there's not much learning going on.*

## RESPONSIBILITY

For three decades, my father taught social studies, coached, and was an administrator in public schools. The best advice he ever gave me about discipline in the classroom was this: "Be as strict as you need to be on the first day; it's always easy to loosen your grip, but very difficult to tighten it." Even at respectable Berkeley, I had to write conduct slips during the first few weeks of classes. As an agent of discipline, it was my responsibility to do so. Establishing early the expectation for civil behavior made the rest of the year much more enjoyable. In my experience, most students want an organized, focused classroom as well. One student wrote in his essay, "In the ideal situation, the student wouldn't even need a conduct slip to quiet him, but simply a warning glance or remark from the teacher. The teacher should be able to get respect on command from the student, much like a conductor brings an orchestra to attention." After a few tacti-

cally-written conduct slips, warning glances and remarks work very well indeed.

Academic standards should also be clear and consistent. Students want assignments to be given in writing, well in advance of deadlines. Like most sensible human beings, they dislike last-minute changes. They expect their work returned to them as quickly as possible and thoroughly evaluated; I have always set a goal for myself of returning any assignment within three days of its due date, since students learn more effectively when feedback is as immediate as possible. Maintaining this turnaround time is difficult, but, as one student writes, "[Teachers] should always work as hard as the student does and give as much as the student does." If the students meet their deadlines, so do I—most of the time.

I have learned not to shy away from the low or failing grade. "If the teacher reads a bad paper," a student wrote, "he or she should be honest and explain what the student did wrong rather than making the student think that it is a flawless paper. After all, a teacher is there to *teach*." Some students truly *need* to fail, and a teacher should accept the responsibility to set high standards and to articulate how those standards have not been met. At the same time, if a student falters, a responsible teacher gives as much assistance as possible to help the student learn.

## ATTENTIVE DETACHMENT

I would guess that many teachers, at the start of their careers, *do too much*. Fresh out of college, stuffed with knowledge, passionate about the subject and determined to *do it right*, the rookie teacher writes lecture after lecture, types and photocopies reams of handouts, and grades every minuscule assignment and quiz. A new teacher is often painfully self-conscious in the classroom, therefore inevitably becomes the center of attention. The new teacher feels she or he must *do everything*.

But a classroom should be a place where the attention is placed on the students, not on the teacher. A teacher should not do the work that students could be doing for themselves. "A good teacher is one that can guide the students, not give them the answer," writes a student. They should be thinking, speaking, writing, and taking an active role in their education. An experienced teacher will create lesson plans that will sometimes let him or her move away from being the focus of the class. I have always been pleasantly surprised at what students accomplish on their own if I point them in the right direction and get out of the way.

As the months pass, I aspire to do less and less in the classroom. With in-class writing exercises, peer editing groups, and

other learner-focused odds and ends, I let the students take over. I step in only when they stray from the task at hand.

### ACADEMIC IGNORANCE

When asked what makes a good teacher, I have heard a surprising number of *teachers* reply, "You have to know your subject." No one would disagree with the need for scholarship. To be sure, effective teachers should know the material intimately, passionately. On the other hand, a teacher should not come across as an arrogant know-it-all. Students, especially teenagers, loathe a patronizing attitude; many will think (correctly), "Of course the teacher knows more about this; he's twenty years older and went to college."

An effective teacher must admit mistakes. In doing this, one sets an example of honesty. One might even say it's an act of bravery to admit a mistake to a roomful of teenagers -- or perhaps you're showing that you're not a coward. Students will respect this, provided you're not constantly making mistakes and generally appearing inept and disorganized. "The most important attribute of good teachers is the respect they have for students and the respect they generate," a student wrote.

A teacher who is a true scholar should set an example as a lifelong learner. A teacher in graduate school should talk about that advanced course when possible. If a teacher is reading a book, or planning a trip, or interested in something that pertains to the subject at hand, he or she should talk about it in the classroom. This shows the students that learning is a process that goes on throughout life. "Good teachers not only teach their students academic subjects," wrote a student, "they also communicate their passion for what they do. They teach them to value new aspects of life and to commit themselves to continual self-education."

In teaching literature, I feel especially fortunate to be able to cover material that relates very easily to students' lives and to my life. Who among us cannot identify personally with moments in *Hamlet* or *Jane Eyre* or *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Catcher in the Rye*? Another student wrote, "A teacher should not only think of himself as a teacher just because he has gone through college and earned a degree but he has to have learned a lot from life. A good teacher should be able to share those life experiences with the kids and teach them about life outside the classroom." In the humanities especially, a teacher should show how the material relates to a student's humanity.

### FLEXIBLE STRUCTURE

Here's an uncomfortable truth for teachers: The information we present in the classroom is worthless if we can't keep students interested. Whether it's Italian sonnets, the Pythagorean theorem, or Roman emperors, what matters most for those who *teach* is to communicate effectively and to make the process of learning compelling to students. Objectives are of little use to a student who can't reach them. More importantly, a good teacher realizes that students learn in different ways; there are a hundred ways to get from octave to sestet, from  $A^2 + B^2$  to  $C^2$ , from Augustus to Zeno, and all of them may be needed in the classroom. The canon of educational methodology can provide a teacher with dozens of approaches for almost any subject, but knowing which one will work in the classroom is the key to effective teaching. Even the students can develop lesson plans if you ask them to.

Consistency is important, but it can be easy to fall into routine, week after week, month after month. Like it or not, students are easily bored. Why let them be bored? Why should a teacher become bored? If a teacher is truly passionate about a subject, can't he or she find new ways of approaching material? As one of my esteemed colleagues has said, "Do you want to teach for thirty years, or teach one year thirty times?"

Also, a teacher needs to pay close attention to his or her classes, and always be ready to make adjustments; on certain days with certain groups, even the best lessons won't work. "A good teacher learns from his classes," wrote a student. "He should take mental notes while his students write down notes. A good teacher should respond to the attitudes of his students. If the students have glazed eyes and are obviously not paying attention . . . the teacher should [try to] understand why his methods are not working and do his best to remedy them so that both the students' and the teacher's time is not wasted."

The students also report that they are frustrated when teachers adopt the mode of "Lecture first, questions later." I believe all questions must be answered immediately. Teachers should never deliberately withhold explanation (leaving a student confused) and continue talking about something the student now understands imperfectly. Of course, I'm sure no teacher has been free of the "Let's-get-the-teacher-off-track." question; most of these concern current events, upcoming or past weekends, or the latest convocation. The students want to digress, and I think a teacher should (seem to) wander off the subject if the digression can be related in some way to what's going on in the classroom, even if it's a stretch.

Often, a particular student will have to move through a subject more slowly than his or her peers. This is when a teacher needs to go to the student and give individual attention. Although time-consuming and even inconvenient, conferences are almost always worth the effort. Many students want the help but feel embarrassed to ask. If nothing else, a conference will impress upon the student that the teacher is willing to exert extra effort, and this realization will make the student want to work harder. One student referred to this personal connection as a *click*. "If a teacher can turn on that *click*, that means the kid will then strive to do his or her possible best."

### **SERIOUS FUN**

I love to make the students laugh. Some days, I feel terribly guilty about it, but I can't resist making a joke or pun or telling a goofy story if I know I can get the students giggling. I rationalize this behavior by telling myself to do nothing in the classroom that doesn't have a purpose. Laughter has a purpose: to create variety, to wake up students, to make them want to pay attention, and to make the classroom a fun place.

I rationalize further by trying, when I do make a joke, to make it about the work of literature. Students can be very impressed by good jokes about heroic couplets, titles of Greek plays, or Thomas Hardy's prose style. I'm surprised by how pleasurable a class can be making fun of a particularly inelegant passage of Thomas Hardy's prose. Allowing the students to feel superior to the text, rather than intimidated by it, encourages them to keep reading. Acknowledging that Hardy is difficult (perhaps intentionally so) and permitting the students to roll their collective eyeballs at the text makes the whole experience more tolerable.

And there are days when you just need to toss out the lesson plan and have fun. Five days a week for almost nine months is no small amount of time to spend together -- approximately 7,500 minutes. There has to be some officially sanctioned fun during the academic year. It's always useful to have a few trump cards ready for those occasions: answering one of those "digressive questions," a game of Baldersh, a circle writing exercise, even films -- *Dead Poets Society*, *Stand and Deliver*, to name a couple.

### **CONFESSIOAL PROFESSIONAL**

Spending so much time with students, a teacher is likely to get to know bits and pieces of the student's personal lives. I have never found it wise to pry into a student's life -- that material is safest when volunteered. But I will often talk about myself -- my life growing up in a small town in Maine, my academic experiences in college, my affinity for hiking, my taste in music, mov-

ies and television, my family, my fiancée, my cat. It seems perfectly human to want to share these things, and it's comforting to have students think of you as a human being, not an automaton assembled from a box every morning.

On the other hand, my personal opinions on certain subjects have little use in the classroom. Talking about religion, politics, money, or sex without presenting as many sides of the issue as possible is dangerous. The students become uncomfortable, their parents will become uncomfortable, and soon everybody's uncomfortable. As one student put it, "Some things are sacred. Your students can live without knowing certain things about you."

\* \* \*

To this point, I have avoided answering the question of why I teach. At root, I enjoy being around young people, teenagers especially. Teens have a terrible reputation these days, though I believe that the derogation of youth by their elders is an ancient and perpetual ritual. I enjoy being around the energy and spirit of young people. If a teacher can find, as one of my students put it, that "click," a gang of surly, bored juveniles will become a team of imaginative, idealistic, curious, aggressive learners. The classroom is changed to a place of potential, of possibility. This sense of possibility is what I find most hopeful and inspiring in the work I do. My students will go into the world -- the future -- better prepared for the unknown and more confident in themselves.